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ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR A SENSITIVE SOCIETY

Catherine M. Toscano

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Public Relations Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
June 30, 2005

Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved 6-30-05

ABSTRACT

Catherine Toscano
ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR A SENSITIVE SOCIETY
2004/05
Dr. Donald Bagin
Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purposes of this study were (a) to discover ethical dilemmas faced in the media and how they affect society; and (b) to determine what new ethical principles need to be established for media to gain back trust from today's society. The author found that lower news reporting standards such as fabrication of information and sources, using false documents and failure to check facts caused members of society to become sensitive and question the integrity of news stations and reporters as well as the validity of news being reported. Because the press has lost the trust of the American people, they can attempt to gain it back in one way—establish new ethical principles fit for a sensitive society. Six-question e-mail surveys were sent to ten media experts to determine ethical principles media should follow when reporting news. Media experts included those in the fields of print, radio, television as well as ethics professors. Survey results found that 40 percent of respondents feel that media ethics are deteriorating, 40 percent feel media ethics are not deteriorating, and 20 percent are unsure if media ethics are deteriorating. The top three principles were: Tell the truth, provide accurate reporting in news stories, and mitigate harm as much as possible.

MINI-ABSTRACT

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The purposes of this study were (a) to discover ethical dilemmas faced in the media and how they affect society; and (b) to determine what new ethical principles need to be established for media to gain back trust from today's society. Six-question e-mail surveys were sent to ten media experts to determine ethical principles media should follow when reporting news. Survey results found that 40 percent of respondents feel that media ethics are deteriorating, 40 percent feel media ethics are not deteriorating, and 20 percent are unsure if media ethics are deteriorating. The top three principles were: Tell the truth, provide accurate reporting in news stories, and mitigate harm as much as possible.

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CHAPTER I

Background

According to a September 2004 Gallup poll, very few Americans still rely on the top names in news. The poll showed that only 44 percent of Americans trust the press to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. Thirty-six percent of those 44 only “fairly trust” the press.¹

With networks in competition for the highest ratings, newspapers rivaling for the most readers and reporters contending to cover the top story, ethical principles in the media continue to deteriorate and as a result society has become sensitive, meaning unsure if they can truly trust the mass media.

Former CBS newscaster Bernard Goldberg wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece, “There are lots of reasons fewer people are watching network news, and one of them, I’m more convinced than ever, is that our viewers simply don’t trust us. And for good reason.”²

For an insider to blow the whistle on unethical practices in the news media and admit his own untrustworthiness leaves no question as to why society has become

¹ Stunner: Americans don’t trust press. (2004, September 24). Media Life Magazine. Retrieved October 2, 2004 from the World Wide Web:

http://www.medialifemagazine.com/news2004/sep04/Sept20/5_fri/news1friday.html

² Goldberg, B. (2001) Bias. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

sensitive. People are susceptible to the news they hear they should not have to question the integrity of the media reporting the news.

The Need for Determining New Ethical Principles

People watch, read or listen to the news to gain insight on current events and most of all, learn the truth. According to the Society of Professional Journalists, “Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.”³

Media should avoid inadvertent error and never deliberately distort information. CNN and *Time Magazine* lost credibility when they released false allegations that the U.S. Military used lethal chemical agents to kill American defectors during the Vietnam War. Ethical principles of the *New York Times* were called to question when top reporter Jayson Blair fabricated information for his stories. And most recently, CBS News went under fire when long-time anchor Dan Rather lost his credibility by releasing forged documents accusing President Bush of receiving preferential treatment during his military service.

Because of the blatant neglect of ethics, the press has lost the trust of the American people and can attempt to gain it back in one way—establish new ethical principles fit for the sensitive society we have become.

The Purpose of this Study

This study has two main purposes. One: to discover ethical dilemmas faced in the media and how they affect society. Two: to determine what new ethical principles need to be established. To carry out these purposes, the writer surveyed ten media experts including ethics professors and individuals in the radio, television, newspaper and

³ Society of Professional Journalists. (2004) Code of Ethics. Retrieved October 15, 2004 from the World Wide Web: http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp.

magazine industries. The writer sent a six-question qualitative survey to each expert. The main focuses of the survey—to determine if media experts feel that mass media ethics are deteriorating and what ethical principles they feel are most important to follow.

Answers to these questions were documented as they were received. A content analysis of the findings determined the top ethical principles the mass media should follow.

The Problem

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Have media ethics deteriorated over the years? If so, why?
2. What are the most important mass media ethical principles members of the media should follow?

Procedures

The procedures for this study were:

1. The author chose ten experts in the mass media to survey.
2. The author sent a six-question e-mail survey to each expert.
3. Responses were documented and formatted. Answers were not altered.
4. The author conducted a content analysis of findings to determine the top ethical principles the mass media should follow when reporting news to a sensitive society.

Limitations

After sending queries to selected participants, ten responses were not met and the author sought out media experts using a different approach—connections. The author asked respondents and other individuals for names of potential media experts and sent

queries to them. The author also sent queries to names originally not pulled from the hat. The end result—10 willing, survey-taking participants accompanied by 10 completed surveys.

Definitions

1. Ethics: In accordance with the societal or professionally accepted principles of right and wrong
2. Principles: Rules or Standards
3. Media expert:
 - a. One who works in the media and abides by a code of ethics, i.e.: reporter, journalist, public relations practitioner, editor
 - b. One who has thoroughly researched mass media ethics and is professor of an ethics course.
4. Deteriorate: To diminish in value or character
5. Sensitive:
 - a. Susceptible to and affected by the attitudes or actions of others
 - b. Does not fully trust in or believe

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Regardless of society's ethical standards, the media supposedly adhere to certain codes of ethics. For instance *The New York Times* follows a code of ethics—"Guidelines on Our Integrity"—that states "At a time of growing and even justified public suspicion about the impartiality, accuracy and integrity of some journalists and some journalism, it is imperative that *The Times* and its staff maintain the highest possible standards to insure that we do nothing that might erode readers' faith and confidence in our news columns."⁴

However, this code did not stop *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair from fabricating information in his stories. The code states: "At a time of growing and even justified public suspicion about the impartiality, accuracy and integrity of some journalists and some journalism, it is imperative that *The Times* and its staff maintain the highest possible standards to insure that we do nothing that might erode readers' faith and confidence in our news columns."

At the time of his hiring, Blair, like all other *New York Times* employees, was introduced to this code. Though many feel that Blair tarnished the name of the *Times*, executive editor Howell Raines remained confident that other *Times* reporters were in fact trustworthy.

⁴ The New York Times Company. (2005). Ethical Journalism Guidebook. Retrieved January 6, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.nytc.com/company-properties-times-coe.html>.

In an interview following the Blair incident, Raines said, "Here at the Times we regard the trust of our readers and our integrity as our most important asset. The process of editing at a paper like the *Times* and the other large papers in this country, is a multi-layered process, and it's designed to handle, to find the unintentional or accidental errors in the copy of people who are working in an atmosphere of mutual trust and integrity and holding a shared faith in the strict set of journalistic values that we observe here. This system is not set up to catch someone who sets out to lie and to use every means at his or her disposal to put false information into the paper."⁵

Why is the process of editing not designed to catch someone who sets out to report false information? If that job does not belong to the editors, then where are the fact checkers? According to a USA Today/CNN Gallup Poll, 62 percent of people surveyed said the media is "often inaccurate."

Why do certain journalists and reporters feel the need to fabricate information? One theory, according to former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, is "The media is trained to get the entertainment value and screw the facts. The media has almost completely lost its objectivity."⁶

Blair unfortunately is not the only case of fabrication in the news. In 1980, the Washington Post faced similar circumstances when reporter Janet Cooke submitted an article about an inner-city, heroin-addicted, 8-year-old boy named Jimmy, who aspired to become a drug dealer. The story won her a Pulitzer Prize as well as much discrepancy

⁵ Lehrer, J.(2003). The Search for Truth. Online News Hour. Retrieved February 2, 2005 from the World Wide Web: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june03/blair_05-09.html.

⁶ Barkai, Yotam. (2004, November 17). Dean '71 criticizes news media. Yale Daily News. Retrieved January 4, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=27403>.

when she could not and would not prove the existence of her source. The Post found that Cooke fabricated her story and fired her. Cooke “blamed her decision to invent Jimmy on the high-pressure environment of the *Washington Post*.”⁷

Newspapers aren’t the only media outlets experiencing controversies of unethical reporting. Recently CBS went under fire for demonstrating negligence of facts when news anchor Dan Rather reported allegations regarding George W. Bush’s service in the military. In response to negativity regarding the authenticity of the memos leading to the report, Rather made a statement on air. He said, “If I knew then what I know now, I would not have gone ahead with the story as it was aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question... Please know that nothing is more important to us than people's trust in our ability and our commitment to report fairly and truthfully.”⁸

Following the investigation CBS fired three “60 Minutes” executives and a producer. Rather, instead of being fired, opted to announce his retirement from anchor before findings from the investigation became public.

Poor ethical choices have even found their way into the most trusted name in news—CNN. In 1998 the network released a story called “Valley of Death” and accused U.S. Special Forces of using deadly nerve gas during a secret incursion into Laos during the Vietnam War.

In an independent investigation on the broadcast, Floyd Abrams stated the following: “Our central conclusion is that although the broadcast was prepared after exhaustive research, was rooted in considerable supportive data, and reflected the deeply

⁷ Janet Cooke and Jimmy’s World. (2001). The Museum of Hoaxes. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the World Wide Web: http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/day/04_17_2001.html.

⁸ CBS News. (2004). Dan Rather Statement on Memos. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/20/politics/main644546.shtml>.

held beliefs of the CNN journalists who prepared it, the central thesis of the broadcast could not be sustained at the time of the broadcast itself and cannot be sustained now. CNN's conclusion that United States troops used nerve gas during the Vietnamese conflict on a mission in Laos designed to kill American defectors is insupportable. CNN should retract the story and apologize.”⁹

As a result, CNN News Group chairman Tom Johnson told the press that, “CNN is taking vigorous steps to see that it (failure of producing facts) won’t happen again.” The consequences—the resignation of the executive producer, the firing of two producers and a “severe reprimanding” of the correspondent held responsible. The author of the Houston Chronicle article makes the point, “If anything good can come out of this CNN-Time debacle, let it be a warning flare that TV news must be responsible for its own fate. And the responsibility of TV news -- today and tomorrow -- is not a sensational story for the sake of sensation, a ratings race, promo hype or corporate synergy. It is simply and solely to cover the news, with as much accuracy and fairness as possible.”¹⁰

American networks and print media outlets aren’t the only ones under fire for fabrication and unethical reporting. The BBC “Accurate, robust, independent, and impartial, journalism is the DNA of the BBC. Audiences should always feel they can trust our words and our deeds. If we live in a more diverse and fragmented society, the BBC must continue to stand out as a place where people feel they are being told openly and honestly about what is happening in the world; where they can rely on unbiased and impartial reporting and analysis to help them make sense of events; and where a debate

⁹ CNN News. (1998). Report on CNN Broadcast Valley of Death. Retrieved March 2, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cnn.com/US/9807/02/tailwind.findings/>.

¹⁰ The Houston Chronicle. (1998). TV News loses its credibility in ratings race. Retrieved September 27, 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.chron.com/cgi-bin/auth/story.mpl/content/chronicle/features/hodges/hodges980706.html>.

can take place in which relevant and significant voices are heard, including those who have uncomfortable questions to ask.” Though Dan Rather and Jayson Blair are the better-known cases to date, they aren’t the only ones to blame. The truth is: Trust in the media for the new millennium dates back to the Al Gore-George W. Bush election of 2000 when American networks unanimously declared Gore the winner, before checking sources. As a result trust in the media dropped to 32%. According to Matthew Felling of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., it doesn’t take much for the average person to lose trust in the media. “You don’t have to follow this story (Jayson Blair) a lot to be troubled by it a lot,” Felling says. “The media can be knocked down a peg during a 10-second exchange between a bartender and a customer.”¹¹

As a result of these injustices, numerous people were fired, asked to resign, or pushed into sudden retirement. Some media sources, like the *New York Times*, redrafted and updated their code of ethics and reassessed their hiring procedures. But why not go one step further? Why not develop a code for all reporters to abide by—10 ethical principles for media to follow when reporting the news.

In a *USA Today* article Joe Saltzman wrote, “Americans do not trust news reports that are not packaged for them by what they perceive to be responsible journalists. And they trust news media presented to them by people they think they know and trust more than anonymous journalists they can’t see and relate to. Americans tend to believe what

¹¹ BBC World News. (2004). Producers’ Guidelines. Retrieved March 5, 2005 from the World Wide Web: http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer_guides/.

Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer say, as opposed to what their favorite uncle or aunt, or parent or spouse, or a print journalist has to say about a story.”¹²

When members of society put their trust into a particular print publication, network or news reporter, they feel betrayed when someone like Dan Rather lets down their standards and misleads them. Society as a result becomes sensitive, meaning they become suspicious, affected by the lies and scandal—they become unsure of whom they should trust.

¹² Saltzman, J. (2000). Who do you trust and why? USA Today (Society for the Advancement of Education) . Retrieved February 8, 2005 from the World Wide Web: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1272/is_2656_128/ai_58576589.

CHAPTER III

Method of Research

Surveys were sent out via e-mail to 10 mass media experts including ethics professors and individuals involved in the radio, television, newspaper and magazine industries.

Phase I – E-mail Survey

The author chose to conduct qualitative research, using e-mail surveys. E-mail is inexpensive, easy to use and takes a short time to complete. Nowadays, media professionals use e-mail as one of their main lines of communication to track work, send news releases, etc. E-mail allowed survey respondents to accurately word their answers, as they would like them to be printed. This allowed for better clarity and validity relating to the answers they supplied. Distributing the surveys through e-mail also allowed respondents more time to look at the answers and respond within minutes to meet the survey deadline if necessary—impossible to do through “snail” mail.

E-mail surveys also left room for gaining additional feedback if necessary—something you could not necessarily gain from a pen and paper questionnaire.

Phase II – Selecting the Population to be Tested

Queries were sent out to various media professionals. The names of 60 media experts were put into a hat and pulled. Thirty names were drawn. Queries, via phone and

e-mail were then sent out in anticipation of gaining responses from ten media experts prior to the author's research deadline.

However, ten responses were not met and the author sought out media experts using a different approach—connections. The author asked respondents and other individuals for names of potential media experts and sent queries to them. The author also sent queries to names originally not pulled from the hat. The end result—10 willing, survey-taking participants accompanied by 10 completed surveys.

Phase III – Conducting the Interviews

Surveys were sent out during the month of March, allowing media experts up to one month to respond. The qualitative survey consisted of the following questions:

1. Where do you/did you work?
2. What title/position did/do you hold?
3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?
4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?
5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?
6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

Phase IV – Treating the Data Collected

E-mail surveys were formatted and can be found in Chapter IV. Responses have not been altered. The author conducted a content analysis of findings and composed a list of the top ethical principles for the mass media to follow. Results appear in Chapter V.

CHAPTER IV

Research Data

The author conducted a six-question e-mail survey to determine the top rated ethical principles for media professional to follow. Surveys were posted in the body of an e-mail and sent out to media professionals. Professionals' responses appear on the following pages.

E-mail Survey for Media Professionals

1. Where do you/did you work?
2. What title/position did/do you hold?
3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?
4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?
5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?
6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

Survey Responses

Respondent 1

1. Where do you/did you work?

Rowan University, College of Communication - Journalism Department

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

Assistant Professor

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

No. Ethics in Media has always been a shaky business. Look at yellow journalism.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

SPJ Code of Ethics when I was a newspaper reporter. My own moral code now, although mostly SPJ still applies.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Don't make up things, people or quotes
2. Always double-check your facts
3. Have compassion for the young, old and sick

Respondent 2

1. Where do you/did you work?

I work at Rowan University – assistant professor of communication.

My media experience includes nearly three years at ABC Radio News (NYC) and 10 years at KYW Newsradio (Philadelphia)

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

At ABC I was a writer/producer. At KYW, I was education reporter and also served as an editor and anchor.

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

Yes. With the advent of 24/7 news outlets and the urgency of getting stories on the air and/or in print, reporters and their editors forget about their responsibilities to the public. Also, many of today's decision makers do not have the experience needed to make key decisions – they have risen to their positions too quickly and lack “street smarts.”

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

I have left two jobs, maybe, three because of conflicts with ethics. Twice in public Relations.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

I abide by a personal professional code of ethics – Open, honest, thorough and valid communication; and by the PRSA Code of Ethics.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Be honest
2. Disclaimers for use of VNRs on T.V.
3. Make every effort to avoid conflicts of interest.

Respondent 3

1. Where do you/did you work?

Review Newspapers in Philadelphia, PA. The papers I oversee are *The South Philly Review* and *Southwest Philly Review*, two urban-community, weekly newspapers.

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

Editor-in chief

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

I believe media ethics are deteriorating because of the intense competition in our industry. The addition of Internet blogging and other more interactive media just adds to an already-pressurizing and mind-blowing mix of so-called news and information out there. Broadcast journalism has stooped to catering to the "reality-TV" mindset by further sensationalizing even serious news.

The pressure to get "the scoop" is far more intense than ever due to so many competing news organizations and the various media in which they are represented. And, with dying subscription rates, even major established newspapers have had to succumb to a bit of sensationalism. Everyone is looking for ways to get the reader/viewer's attention.

Media, like any other industry, is composed of for-profit businesses. Nonetheless, that doesn't give permission for a long-held watchdog/"fourth arm of government" to breach the trust of its public, which continues to rely on this information to form valuable opinions that indeed can influence everything from a presidential election to a war to a worldwide relief effort. All of the examples have been apparent in recent years.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

In fairness, this is the only major journalism establishment for which I've worked full-time. Those for which I've freelanced or contributed in the past fortunately were established and ethical, as I consider my current company to be. As editor here for more than a decade, I have played a large role in establishing our editorial code of ethics, and indeed have even influenced our ethical boundaries in advertising.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Certainly we abide by the general rules of responsibility and fairness in reporting and writing, and I am especially militant about eliminating even perceived bias in our stories. I also live by the adage, "There are at least three sides to every story" -- and I insist that my reporters collect every possible viewpoint.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

My intro:

If you became a journalist to become rich and famous, get out now. These aspirations very well might prevent you from doing your job as you should. True journalists have a hunger for information, and then set out to prove that information in the interest of informing the public responsibly. If you lack empathy for the common person, you will lack credibility when telling the story.

1. Don't have an "agenda" or presume what a story involves until you've actually researched it. Ask many questions and seek many answers; then form your analysis and report it fairly.

2. Don't put words into your sources' mouths. Whether directly or indirectly, quote people accurately and fairly, regardless of whether you agree with what they're saying.
3. Tell the story directly and in language the average reader can understand—and remember that if you don't understand what you're writing, no one else will either. Don't get creative or distort facts in the process.

Respondent 4

1. Where do you/did you work?

I work at KBTX, the CBS affiliate in Bryan/College Station Texas. However, starting March 28th I will start as a reporter with an ABC affiliate, KVEW in Kennewick, WA.

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

General Assignment Reporter

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

Yes I do. Just look at what happened to Dan Rather and the documents focusing on Bush's service. Someone should have checked the source of the documents and made sure they were reliable before going public with them. Journalists should recognize that their first obligation is to the public and telling the truth.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No, I have never left a job for ethical reasons and I hope I never have to.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

I do abide by a certain code of ethics. Most codes are similar. My work place of course has one, but the one I like particularly is the one written by the Radio Television News Directors Association. (www.rtnda.org)

I follow this code of ethics because it's what makes a good journalist, one who is credible to his/her viewers.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Report the truth
2. Be fair; there are two sides to every story and you must always try your best to report them.
3. Minimize harm; in other words show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by the news coverage; show respect.

Respondent 5

1. Where do you/did you work?

School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

John L. Hulteng Chair in Media Ethics

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

That's kind of a general question. I think that the media industries are changing; particularly news journalism, and I think there's a lot more attention paid to ethical problems now because of the level of coverage. But I don't necessarily think we're any more or less ethical today than 20 years ago. I do think people are a lot more attuned to ethical breaches than before, however.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No. It would have to be a pretty big breach for most people to leave a job. Most everyday ethical issues can be dealt with without having to resign.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Since I'm not a working media practitioner, I don't follow any particular professional code.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Treat everyone with respect
2. Tell the whole truth

3. Mitigate harm as much as possible

Respondent 6

1. Where do you/did you work?

I work at The Washington Post

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

I am the director of the Young Journalists Development Program (YJDP). I was a Post reporter for 25 years before I took this management job. YJDP is a program started by The Post in 1997 to help develop the next generation of journalists. I work with high school and college students who are interested in careers in journalism.

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

I don't think media ethics are deteriorating.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Yes, I do abide by a certain code of ethics for Post staffers because I strongly believe media professionals have to follow the highest standards and ethics. The Post has a Code of Business Conduct that is an important document. Don Graham, the Post CEO, states in the introduction to the Code of Conduct: "We believe in doing the right thing and we believe that the long-term success of our business depends on it." I agree with Don Graham.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Media professionals should provide fair and accurate reporting in news stories.
2. Media professionals should avoid conflicts of interest.
3. Media professionals should not engage in political activities.

Respondent 7

1. Where do you/did you work?

Courier-Post, Cherry Hill, NJ

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

Assistant Metro Editor

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

Yes. We are getting too much like the tabloids. The line between “legitimate” news and “infotainment” (the doings of celebrities and their personal lives and problems) has disappeared.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization’s ability?

Not yet.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Yes. The corporation that owns the Courier, Gannett, has its own code of ethics. I also have my own code.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Print the truth
2. Be fair to all parties
3. Keep your own personal biases out of your news columns. Save them for editorials.

Respondent 8

1. Where do you/did you work?

I work at the Courier-Post in Cherry Hill and Rowan.

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

I am assistant features editor at the Courier-Post and adjunct professor at Rowan.

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

I think the majority of media workers and media companies maintain high ethical standards. It's the only way to maintain credibility with sources and audiences so they will continue to be consumers of your products and, as such, the only way to be successful and profitable. Many are trying to raise their ethical standards to ensure they'll remain effective and successful. Ethics are deteriorating for a few media workers and media companies and they are likely to become ineffective and unsuccessful. That's the way it is in every profession.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

I have never left a job because I did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability. I have been fortunate to be able to maintain my ethical standards and not faced compromising them by the organizations for which I've worked.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

I try to abide by a code of ethics in my newspaper job, my university job and the other parts of my life. Essentially, I think we have to try to do what's right all the time,

treat others respectfully and avoid conflicts of interest or anything misleading or harmful to ourselves or others. I think that allows us to do our jobs well, live our lives well and help, rather than harm, others and ourselves. The newspaper and the university also have formal codes we follow and the professions do, also.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Always be honest. That pertains to your dealings with your sources, audiences, colleagues, work and self.
2. Always keep your work pure and separated from other parts of your life. Avoid all conflicts of interest, potential conflicts of interest and appearances of conflicts of interest. That pertains to community involvement, volunteer work, financial interests, other jobs, family responsibilities and friendships.
3. Always maintain your credibility and integrity. Do what's right by your sources, audiences, colleagues, work and self.

Respondent 9

1. Where do you/did you work?

The Star-Ledger for the past 10 years. Previously worked at the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, Louisville Courier-Journal, Akron Beacon Journal and United Press International.

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

Associate Editor.

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating? If so, why?

No, I don't think media ethics are deteriorating? I believe a very few people are trying to cheat the system by plagiarizing and because of technology, they are being caught.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No.

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

Yes. There are no written rules here. As editors at a major newspaper with a lot of previous experience here and elsewhere, we know and practice (as do our staff) the rules of good journalistic standards.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Always be truthful.

2. Always be fair.
3. Never shortcut fairness or truth.

Respondent 10

1. Where do you/did you work?

I work at WCTC Radio in New Brunswick, New Jersey

2. What title/position did/do you hold?

I'm a news reporter/anchor

3. Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating?

I don't know as a whole if media ethics are deteriorating, but there are certain writers who have been caught making up stories and I think those people are bringing media ethics and the industry down.

4. Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

No, I haven't

5. Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics? Why or why not?

I think you have to abide by a code of ethics. I think you have to make sure that when you write a story, that it's a fair one; if it's controversial, you have to get both sides of the story and let both sides say their piece. Also, it's important to be accurate and not put your opinion into the story; let your sources tell the story.

6. If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

1. Be fair.
2. Be accurate.
3. Tell the truth.

CHAPTER V

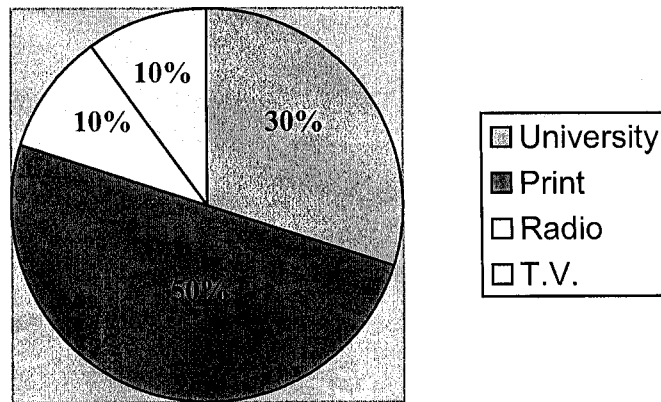
Conclusions

After conducting a content analysis of the survey results, the author found the following information:

Question 1: Where do you/did you work?

Thirty percent of the media experts work or worked for a University, 50 percent work or worked for a print publication, 10 percent work or worked in radio and 10 percent work or worked in television. Thirty percent of the media experts have worked in or also work in another field of communication aside from their present employment.

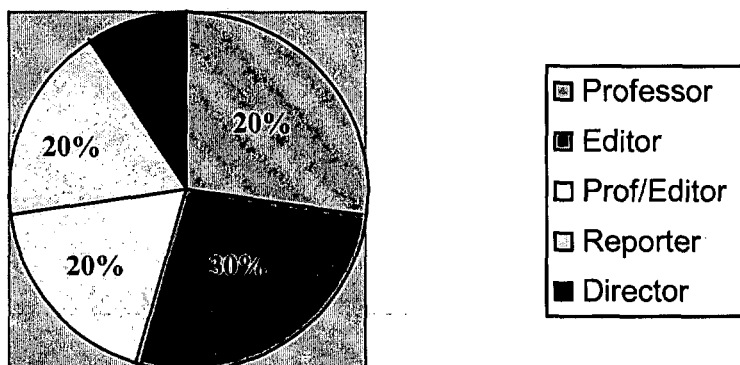
Question 1 - Graph I



Question 2: What title/position do you/did you hold?

Thirty percent of the media experts are professors, 20 percent are editors, 20 percent are both editors and professors, 20 percent are anchors or reporters and 10 percent are program directors.

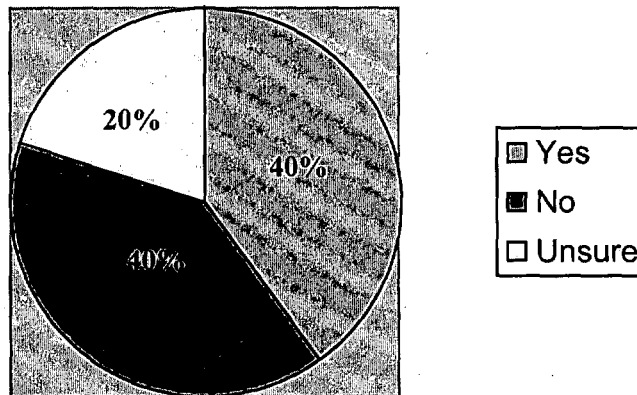
Question 2 -Graph II



Question 3: Do you feel media ethics are deteriorating?

Forty percent of the media experts feel that media ethics are deteriorating, 40 percent feel that media ethics are not deteriorating and 20 percent are unsure if media ethics are deteriorating.

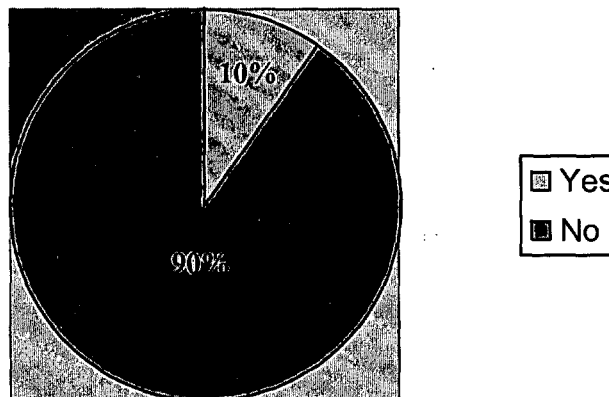
Question 3 -Graph III



Question 4: Have you ever left a job because you did not feel ethical principles were being followed to the best of the organization's ability?

Ninety percent of the media experts said that they have never left a job because media ethics were not being followed. Ten percent, however said they have left a job because of problems with poor use or lack of ethics.

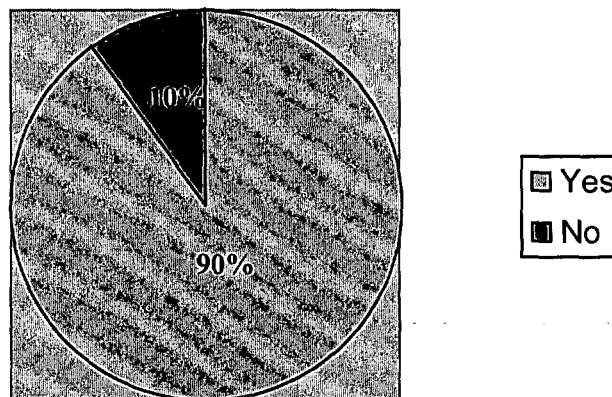
Question 4 -Graph IV



Question 5: Do you abide by a certain code of ethics either for your workplace or a general code like the Journalistic Code of Ethics?

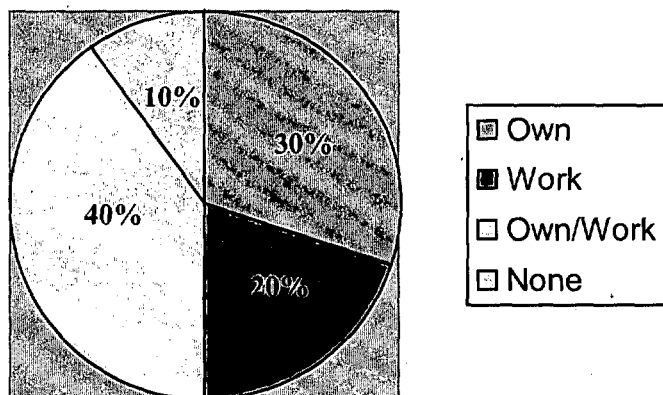
Ninety percent of the media experts said yes, they do abide by a code of ethics, while 10 percent said they do not abide by a code of ethics.

Question 5 -Graph V



Thirty percent of the media experts abide by their own code of ethics, 20 percent abide by their work's code of ethics, 40 percent abide by both their own code and their work's code of ethics and 10 percent do not abide by any code of ethics.

Question 5 -Graph VI



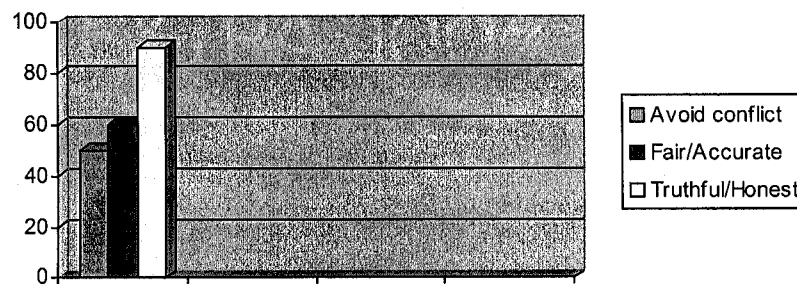
Question 6: If you had the opportunity to write a new rulebook listing the three most important ethical principles for media professionals to follow, what would they be?

The media experts came up with the following ethical principles:

1. Tell the truth/be honest – 9
2. Provide fair and accurate reporting in news stories – 6
3. Avoid conflicts of interest/ mitigate harm as much as possible – 5
4. Keep your own personal biases out of your news columns – 2
5. Always double-check your facts
6. Get disclaimers for use of VNRs on T.V.
7. Treat everyone with respect
8. Media professionals should not engage in political activities.
9. Always maintain your credibility and integrity.

Ninety percent of the media experts feel that media should be honest and tell the truth, 60 percent feel that media should report the news accurately and fairly, and 50 percent feel that media should avoid conflicts of interest and mitigate harm as much as possible.

Question 6 -Graph VII



In conclusion, the author found that the top three ethical principles for media to follow when dealing with a sensitive society are:

1. Tell the truth/be honest
2. Provide fair and accurate reporting in news stories
3. Avoid conflicts of interest/ mitigate harm as much as possible

Public relations practitioners not only work with the media, but also assume a similar role when practicing public relations. The guides determined for media professionals to follow when dealing with a sensitive society are similar to the guides public relations practitioners should follow when dealing with their clients—practice open, honest, thorough and valid public relations.¹³

This study met its purpose—to determine the top three ethical principles for media to follow when dealing with a sensitive society. Unfortunately Jayson Blairs do exist in this world and society may never fully trust the media. However, avoiding harm and taking an honest and accurate approach to reporting the news is the first step media can take to gain back the trust of today's sensitive society.

Suggestions for Further Study

Finding willing participants was not an easy feat. The author's selection of media professionals was limited. Any further studies should broaden the definition of "media professional" and seek to survey professionals in other media fields in addition to the fields the author selected.

¹³ Litwin, L. (2003) The Public Relations Practitioner's Playbook-A Synergized Approach to Effective Two-way Communication. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.

The author also suggests conducting focus groups to find out why and if media professionals feel ethical principles are deteriorating. The questions in this study were asked in a way that respondents could provide as much or as little feedback as they desired. Focus groups could provide more in-depth feedback on whether or not media professionals feel ethics are deteriorating.

The author also suggests conducting a follow-up study to determine if media agree with and are willing to adopt the top ranked ethical principles found in this study.

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